



Eating an Elephant, a Bite at a Time

Fate cooked up a difficult dish for Oklahoma City to swallow. The recipe calls for a sprawling, oddly configured 80,000 square-foot former dry cleaning facility that takes up almost a block near the city's Central Business District (CBD). Add a heaping cup of concern about legacy soil and groundwater contamination from past site operations. Sprinkle in some indoor asbestos and lead based paint. Stir in 3 state regulators for environmental issues (Oklahoma Corporation Commission (OCC) for petroleum; Oklahoma Department of Labor (ODOL) for asbestos, and Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ) for other hazardous contamination). Let the site marinate in idleness for a decade. Then mix in the city for guidance for the re-development project and EPA Brownfields Program for Cleanup grant funding, and serve cold.

The non-profit taking on this challenging revitalization project understood they would be chewing on it for a long time. It would not be a simple or quick process bringing this site back to life. As Marilyn Stark, Love Link Ministries' Executive Director quipped "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time."

NuWay Cleaners facility was constructed around 1928. The building is an example of Art-Deco Streamline design, which along with its neon sign, remains an iconic landmark for the city. The site is located at NW 6th and N Western in a minority and economically stressed area (46% minority, 39% living below poverty) which has not yet benefited from the nearby CBD revitalization. The cleaners closed in the early 1990's. Lonely and dark, the buildings interior seems as if operations suddenly stopped, with machines left, and hangers dangling, ready for the next customers to arrive. It sat like this for a decade until a local non-profit saw through the rust to the gem beneath.

Love Link Ministries is a non-profit religious social organization that, since 1991, has been gathering resources to help people in need – the poor, unemployed, sick, elderly, illiterate & homeless. The non-profit provides meals, food baskets, and clothing to its clients. In addition to their service center, Love Link operates three recovery houses for reforming alcoholics and people with drug dependency. A large percentage of the clients served are Native American.

The city, state, and federal government (EPA) pitched in to assist with the project. The state provided critical risk communication and technical assistance that helped resolve site contamination issues. The city provided guidance and helped with grant compliance. Free 2005 and 2009 EPA Targeted Brownfields Assessment (TBA) services helped define the site's environmental legacy and cleared the way for Love Link's 2006 purchase. The services will help Love Link get clearance (No Further Action) letters from OCC and ODEQ for soil and groundwater site contamination issues. In 2008, Love Link successfully competed for a Brownfields Cleanup Grant for asbestos cleanup (completion expected in early 2010).

The move from their existing service center to NuWay quadruples their space and allows Love Link to plan on expanding services to include women, after school, outpatient drug and alcohol treatment programs, as well as a medical/dental clinic. First, however, the non-profit and its volunteers have a big job ahead of them converting a vacant eclectic piece of a city's history into something to benefit the community. The old dry cleaning boilers need to be removed. Floor drainage channels need to be filled in. Interior spaces need to be renovated. Site needs to be brought up to code (e.g., sprinkler system installation, parking created). In June 2009, Love Link achieved the long awaited remodeling permit and starting working in earnest to transform the building. Love Link's full use of this site cannot happen until an occupancy permit is issued by the City. A key to getting the permit is to abate the asbestos (with the EPA grant) and then demolish an outbuilding so parking can be constructed. For more information on this project, please contact Marilyn Stark at 405-239-6219.

